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A WORLD WITHOUT A CHILD

A STORY FOR WOMEN AND FOR MEN

By
COULSON KERNAHAN

*Author of "The Face Beyond the Door,"
"God and the Ant," etc.*

LONDON
HODDER AND STOUGHTON
27 PATERNOSTER ROW

1905

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TO THE STAINLESS SOUL OF
A LITTLE CHILD



•

BY WAY OF PREFACE

WHERE THE WOMAN WE LOVE CEASES
TO EDUCATE US, THE CHILD BEGINS.
THAT WHICH THE WOMAN LEAVES UN-
TOUCHED IN A MAN'S NATURE, CAN
ONLY BY THE CHILD BE DEVELOPED
AND PERFECTED.

C. K.

*16 Norfolk Square,
Brighton.*

PROEM

THE night of New Year's Eve had come, and I stood under the stars in a garden brimmed with white moonlight, and set around with trees. In the garden all was still, and the sky was clear overhead, but low down on the horizon Night was plying her spindle, weaving floating and fleecy cloud-flax into the dark fabric of cloud-curtains, to be drawn ere long around the sleeping place of the moon. As a veil of fine lawn might cover a girl's face, so suddenly a wisp of white cloud-wrack drifted across the moon. I say "across the moon," but so undimmed was her splendour that one might have supposed the veil had been draped about her face instead of drawn across it.

Proem

As metal is cut by a die, as flesh is cut by a knife, so the moving mist seemed to be cut through on meeting the moon's edge. And so sharp was the severance, that when the cloud-wrack which aureoled the moon was suddenly stained luminous cinnamon—as a cloth is stained amber or topaz by spilt wine, as the clothing of a duellist is stained crimson by a wound—it seemed to me that the white cloud-wrack was stained with the ebbing of its own blood.

Suddenly, faint and far, wind-borne upon the breeze, came the first chime of a church bell striking the hour. The old year was irrevocably gone—a year of sin and shame and cowardice, of mean aims, mean acts, mean defeats and meaner triumphs.

Looking back upon the track I had trodden, it seemed to me like some slimy serpent-trail upon

Proem

the face of God's fair world. I could not bear to think of it ; and as an archer wings a shaft into the blue, so I strove to wing my thoughts, arrow-wise, into the unstained future.

I looked upon that future as a traveller standing upon a hill looks at dawn upon a far stretch of unknown country.

As to-morrow, and the days of the week which lie before us, differ not greatly from yesterday and the days of the week that have just gone, so, to the traveller, the face of the landscape before him—fields and lanes and highways, with here and there a common, and here and there a church—is not unlike the face of the landscape through which he has just passed.

In the immediate future there is no menace of that Unknown which is always the dreaded.

But beyond this near stretch of

Proem

country the traveller realizes that
—hidden in mists he cannot pierce
—lies a strange and unknown land.

And looking into the year that
lay before me, I fancied that—
glittering above the smoking plain
—I caught a glimpse of the towers
and pinnacles of a great city. The
next moment, towers and pin-
nacles were gone, and I saw only
a desolate land of dark, the shadows
of bare rock and brooding moun-
tain, and, beyond the mist, the
utter loneliness of the sea.

“The coming year! O God!”

I cried, “what holds it for me of
good or evil? Shall my feet in-
deed tread the streets of some city
of light which I have seen miraged
only in my dreams? or shall they
lead me to the sullen shore of
Death’s inexorable sea?”

But on the night there came no
answer save the answer of my own
soul:—

Proem

“To all men, even to the impure,
God grants the gift of memory.
But the memory of the impure is
like an opaque-backed mirror hung
on a wall. It shows only what
lies behind. But sometimes, to
those who are crystal-pure of
heart, God gives, in place of
memory’s mirror, a magic glass,
as crystal-pure even as their hearts
—a glass in which may be seen, not
only the mirrored picture of what
lies behind, but also of what lies be-
fore. These are they whom men call
poets and prophets, and of all men
they most resemble God, inasmuch
as in a measure they share the
power to foresee what is to
come, as well as to remember what
is past. These are the pure in
heart, and thou art not as they.
Therefore, to look into the future
is denied thee. Look back upon
thy past thou mayest, for the past
lies hidden in thine own thoughts.

Proem

But the future lies hidden in the thoughts of God, and into the thoughts of God the impure of heart may never see."

PART I

B



I

THAT night as I slept I had a dream of the future. I seemed to be looking upon London as it will be a hundred years hence. Changes had come about of necessity—changes in methods of locomotion, changes in costume, changes in many public buildings and public streets. Except, however, for the fact that parks and pleasure grounds had multiplied on every side, the London on which I looked was not greatly different from the London of to-day. One change, however, attracted my attention—many churches and chapels had entirely disappeared, and most of those which remained seemed to have lost their sacred character. At one time these churches had been

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among the most distinctive buildings in every quarter, but now, wherever one looked, huge palaces of entertainment or refreshment sought—if only by their very bulk—to shoulder all other buildings out of sight. Colossal of scale, superbly proportioned, these palaces of delight dominated the place in which they stood, as a pyramid dominates its immediate surroundings in the desert. Upon them had been lavished all the imaginings of the architect, all the magnificence of design and decoration which art could conceive and money buy. Nor did these splendours go unappreciated. Sunday though I knew the day to be, the theatres and music halls were open and filled to overcrowding. In the *cafés*, restaurants and drinking places, gaily dressed throngs lounged, smoking, or sipping the nectar of

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rare wines and liqueurs. Bands played in the public squares ; and, in the parks and open spaces, games of skill and strength were watched by eager crowds.

I remember, however, that what I most missed in this new world, thus given up to pleasure and delight, was the laughter of little children. Children there were, but only a few, and their faces seemed to have lost something of the freshness of childhood. It often happens that when youth and maiden, man and woman, love God, and love each other so purely that they take no thought of aught but of God and of their love—God takes thought for their children, that they be straight and strong and very beautiful. But when the man and the woman make not love their world, but the world their love ;—either delaying mar-

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riage till youth be gone, lest by living simply they lose something of ease and comfort, or, if they marry, hoping that their union be childless, lest the dear and lovely burden of babyhood (a burden which no true woman would willingly forego) lie upon a bosom which, but for that burden, had been bared, not to the sweet pressure of baby lips and fingers, but to the eyes of partners in a dance, of fellow-guests at a dinner, or of utter strangers in a theatre ;—when those, who love, thus take thought to evade love's sacred obligation, take thought of money and position and worldly pleasure, it often happens that upon the faces of their children, if children come, is to be seen something of the ageing anxiousness which had filled the thoughts of their parents.

The faces of the children, upon whom I was now looking, seemed

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to me strangely worn and wizened. They were like the faces of the children of the old.

Wondering at all this, I walked slowly on, and before long found myself approaching St. Paul's. When last I had seen the great Cathedral, hemmed in as it was among mean surroundings of mart and shop and warehouse, I had likened it in my mind to some magnificent tropical plant, the seed of which had chanced to drop among rank and closely growing weeds, and so, in the struggle for existence, had been compelled to tower above its fellows, that thereby it might thrust upward, to the light and to the sun, the purple closed-flower of its dome.

Now I was rejoiced to see it surrounded by spacious grounds, for these baser growths had been swept away; and bole and branch and blossom stood open to the

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sky. As I drew near I heard, coming from within, the sound of cheers and laughter and stamping feet. A venerable old man, still hale of body, and with the light of undimmed intellect flashing in his eyes, was coming from the portal, his face ablaze with wrath, as he shook off, as it were, the very dust of the place from his shoes.

To him I addressed myself:—

“Sir, what means this unseemly disturbance in the House of God? I am but newly arrived in this country, and in this city, after an absence of many, many years; and the sights I see, the sounds I hear, but most of all this sacrilegious uproar coming from the nation’s house of prayer, make me ask myself what change has come to Christian England that such things can be on the day of rest.”

“Your absence must indeed

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have been long and your wanderings far and many," he made answer with sad courtesy, "if you know not of the changes that have come about in England and in Europe this many a year ' If your object be but to mock an old man's grief at the godlessness that has spread like a canker in this city and in this nation, I pray you to stand aside and let me pass."

"Sir," I said, "believe me that I am one who has so long been dead to the world which once I knew, that all I see around me is strange and unfamiliar. That which I ask you, I ask in all sincerity. What means, then, this unseemly disturbance in God's house and on God's day?"

"Did God dwell in houses builded of men, He might often go homeless in England to-day," was the answer. "Know ye not that save for a faithful few, the

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setting apart of one day in the week for the worship of God has long ceased in this country, even as what were once Houses of Prayer have now been converted to the people's use as Places of Entertainment or Palaces of Delight ? ”

“ Has this country no national religion then ? ” I asked.

“ None,” was the reply. “ England of to-day is divided into two great parties—the Pleasurists and the Pessimists. The former preach the familiar doctrine, ‘ Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die.’ They acknowledge no responsibility to any Supreme Being, or to posterity, declaring that each is here to find in life what pleasure he can. The Pessimists, on the other hand, preach, as of old, that this is the worst of all possible worlds. They denounce it as a crime to bring a child into

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a world where all must suffer pain of body and fear of mind, until called on to undergo the final mind-agony and body-pangs of death. Suicide they hold to be no sin, since the sooner the human race comes to an end, the better for all concerned. Whether one be a Pleasurist or Pessimist is very much a question of temperament or of health, and matters very little in the end, since each is equally Godless in life."

"Is this then the reason," I said, "why I see so few children, and that the few I see, look as if they no longer knew all men and women—even the veriest stranger—to be the little ones' lover and friend?"

And sadly the old man made answer:—

"Very lovely is the confidence of childhood. We do well to speak

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of 'King Baby,' for the right, by which a little child shall rule, is a diviner, sweeter right and sanctity than ever was accorded to kings. It is the unalienable right, the royal prerogative, of every child to come into this world assured that its coming will set joybells of the heart a-ringing.

"Ere that child came to earth, God stooped to take into His arms the tiny image of Himself, to breathe between the little lips the breath of His own life, to set upon the baby brow the kiss of which dreaming children think when suddenly they smile in their sleep. Then with infinite tenderness He laid the little flower-like form in the hands of an angel, kneeling to receive the precious burden :

"Out of God's hands, and the hands of God's angels in heaven, thou shalt pass into the care of God's angels on earth. Thou shalt

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enter the world speeded of God,
and tended by the hands of God's
dear women, even as when thou
leavest it, God's dear women shall
tend thee to the last, and God and
His Son, thy Saviour, shall wait to
welcome thy return.

“Go forth little one, and may
thy coming make glad the hearts
of women and men, for I have
sent thee, I am with thee. Go!”

II

THE old man's voice broke, and with pity that was wrathful, and wrath that was pitiful, he cried :—

“ And now the little children, whom God has sent, are no longer welcome in a world given up to selfish seeking after pleasure and after vanity.

“ I say not that the world has grown worse in all respects. Many evils, which I remember, disfigure the face of civilisation no more. Crime is in many, if not most, cases, the result of upbringing and surroundings. Society saw this, and, seeing, too, that crime was a menace to herself—society, for her own protection, so ordered things that the incentives to crime are gone. Therein is the world the better, and therein am I grateful

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and glad. But my gladness and my gratitude cannot make me forget the fact that the world has grown Christless and Godless.

“It is nigh a hundred years ago since the change began. Till then, Religion—though the world was slowly becoming secularised, and faith in Revealed Religion was on the wane—was still a power in the land. But, inch by inch, Secularism gained ground. At first only in the great cities, then like some huge octopus, she stretched forth her tentacles to the towns, making, wherever she established herself, new centres, from which stealthily to protrude fingers that, as they neared a victim, shot out suddenly into interminably extended arms ; till at last she laid hold on the villages, and, finally, sprawled herself obscenely over the land, sucking, leech-like, at the life-blood of the nation, crushing

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religion, cobra-wise, in her folds, and suffocating faith by her voided slime.

“ All this took long to accomplish ; and possibly Secularism had not throttled Religion in England thus easily, had not other causes contributed to the same end. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, there came to this country a season of unprecedented prosperity. Trade throve as trade had never thriven before. Money accumulated on all hands, and to such an extent that some of those whose tempers had once been soured and their faces sharpened by the constant and irking need of a few pounds, at last became newly sharpened of feature and temper, because they could not fast enough devise new pleasures upon which to squander their wealth.

“ At first the sudden influx of

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money into the land, with the consequent cessation of the necessity to work, brought no ill-effects in its train. The mass of the people abandoned themselves, it is true, to the pursuit of pleasure, but the pleasure-seeking took a healthy turn. Field-sports and games of every sort were ardently followed. Those who had formerly spent their days working at a desk, serving in a shop, or toiling in a factory or warehouse, were now for the first time, and for a great portion of the day, in the fresh air, with benefit both to body and to brain. Our national physique improved, and with it our morals.

“ But in course of time the reaction came. Not all at once, for, to this day, those who occupy themselves in games and sports may be reckoned by millions. Once, however, let the necessity to

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work be removed, and it is surprising how swiftly the individual or the nation lapses into idleness, how inevitably idleness becomes self-indulgence, and how easily consistent self-indulgence passes by slow stages first into luxuriousness, next into licence, and finally into vice.

“The people grew more lazy, more luxurious, more disinclined to bestir themselves every day. Instead of themselves taking part, as of old, in the sports they loved, they now allowed themselves the luxury of paying other and poorer folk to play these sports for them, while they, inactive themselves, lounged smoking and drinking, to look on. And so insensibly the manhood of the race softened. While the people of England could afford to buy wheat from other lands, what need for them to till or to toil in their own fields?

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While they could travel long distances in cars provided with every luxury, why trouble themselves to ride or to walk ? While they could pay Chinamen to work their mines, Lascars to man their ships, Negroes, Indians, and Arabs to fight their battles, and other mercenaries to fetch, carry, cook, scrub, bake, why task themselves unnecessarily ? Their very children, the women at last ceased to suckle, laying the lips of their little ones to strange breasts, and leaving them when older to Ayahs to tend, and to women of other lands to teach.

“Then against child-bearing itself the women of England began to rebel. ‘Too long have we borne this heavy and unequal affliction,’ they cried. ‘Why should God penalise us thus from our birth—laying the burden and the suffering upon the weaker sex,

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instead of upon the sex which is strong? Scarcely are we out of our own childhood before this life-long humiliation is laid upon us, to rack us with ache in brain and limb and body; to wound, with crueller ache, our sensitive and shrinking spirit, and to terrify us with the threat of possible anguish to come. The Psalmist, being a man, could write merrily of the bridegroom coming "rejoicing out of his chamber." It was like a man to forget that every woman who of her great love, gives herself to wife, knows well that it may be her own death-sentence which she hears, when they two are declared to be man and wife. If she bear a child to her husband, and bear in safety, she is but as one who has been reprieved; and has no assurance that a time may not come thereafter

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when the dread sentence will be carried out.

“ ‘ From birth to burial, the days of a woman are but cycles and seasons of sickness of body and sadness of mind, of travail and torture that must be faced, with the consciousness that she may never live to look upon the features of the child for whose sake her travail and her torture are borne.

“ ‘ Let us make an end of this cruelty, of this life-long iniquity. Wives we will be, if so it pleases us, but mothers we will be no more. We, no less than men, have our individual lives to live, we have other vocations to follow than the bearing of children at the will of a man or at the bidding of a God. Of the two who are responsible for the coming of a child, one, and that one the strong and sturdily framed, goes free, while the pain and the torture in their entirety

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are appointed to be the lot of women, soft of flesh, delicate of frame, and exquisitely sensitive to anguish of body and fear of mind.

“ ‘ If God, as men assert, be responsible for all this,—and for more than this, for if it happen that the child be born out of wedlock, once again it is the woman who pays, once again the man goes free, while upon the woman who, haply is more sinned against than sinning, the direst and most cruel consequences fall,—if God, as men assert, be answerable for all this, is it not time that we women de-throned in our hearts the unjust Judge and dishonest Apportioner of life’s good and evil, either refusing to believe in a God at all, or else setting up in His stead another God of our own to worship ? If the Christ approve this cowardly, cruel and iniquitous scheme, then say we to the Christ :

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“ ‘ By this we know that Thou wast but a man, with all a man’s injustice to women ; and though Thou dost claim to have shared, with Thy fellow men, all that a man may endure of human suffering, yet have we women no part in Thee, for though Thou hast shared all else, at least Thou hast never shared the heaviness and the anguish of a woman’s lot. We owe no allegiance to a Divinity—be he God or be he Christ—who has doomed unresisting, defenceless women to such a lot. The right of such an one to sit in judgment upon us thus to sentence us, and to cast us, untried and unheard, into dungeons of despair, we henceforth and for ever repudiate and deny.’ ”

III

THE old man paused, white and trembling.

"Blasphemy such as this," he said, "one shrinks even from repeating, but so it was that many women spoke a century's half ago, and so it is that many more speak to-day. That the mystery of human suffering, and, most of all, the mystery of woman's suffering, gives cause and gives colour to their bitterness and even to their blasphemy, I who seek the truth may not deny.

"But creed is more often the outcome of conduct than conduct is of creed. To decide to disobey God, to persist in that disobedience, means that you have decided to do without God in your life. And

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when you have decided to put God out of your life, you are already an atheist by choice, and must not complain if you end in becoming one by conviction.

“ So it was with these women of whom I have spoken. Their denial of God was the result, the inevitable result, of a godless life.

“ Even when I was a lad, in the second quarter of the twentieth century, I remember hearing my father say that the growing godlessness of women was the most appalling sign of the times. The women, even more than the men, had become selfish, sensual, and worldly. I mean not that all women were so, for the godly women far outnumbered the ungodly, if, alas ! the ungodly outnumber the godly to-day. But no fact was so significant, no fact seemed more to menace the end of all things earthly, than the

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terrible change for the worse which had come over women. Among women of all classes, the drink-habit and the drug-habit were enormously on the increase. In 'society,' so called, the home life was almost entirely a thing of the past, and the majority of marriages were childless. The women occupied themselves chiefly in card-playing, gambling on race-courses, speculating on the Stock Exchange, and in wantonness which was all the worse—not because it led, but because it did not lead, to the Divorce Court. Violation of the marriage vow was so common as scarcely to cause surprise; and men, perhaps because of their own evil living, had become too shamelessly craven and complacent to trouble themselves to make an exception by suing for a divorce.

“Among the women of the middle

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classes, the semblance of morality and respectability remained, but child-bearing had for the most part ceased. As of old, the man desired a wife, as of old, the woman desired a husband, but whereas of old, a marriage was counted to be crowned and made newly holy, newly honourable, and newly happy by the birth of a child—that marriage had come to be counted most fortunate where child there was none.

“ And so too, among the women who stood lowest in the social scale. They also refused to bear children to their husbands; and if actual immorality was less common than among the women who constituted ‘society’—coarseness, even shamelessness of speech and action were only too frequent. Many of them were to be seen with lover or with husband, sitting long evenings

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through in the public house, bandying unclean jests, and setting vile slanders afoot about their neighbours.

“When such changes can come about in woman—and, alas! we have gone from bad to worse during the last fifty years—one is tempted to think that the end of the world must be nigh. At one time the history of religion seemed to be written in the hearts of good women. They were the mainstay of morality, pity, purity, and of the spirit of utter selflessness, which is to be seen in all its immeasurable majesty in the Christ. Their very sufferings made them nearer to Him, liker to Him, than man can ever be. Every woman, most of all every mother, is, by her very nature, a Christian. Now one meets everywhere old women, young women, wives and maidens, comely of face and figure, soft-

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voiced, friendly-seeming — the ghost, the shadow, the mere semblance of what woman once was, yet seemingly happy and satisfied and in no way suspecting that the soul of their womanhood is gone—who tell you smilingly that Christ was a man, that God is not, that Heaven or Hereafter there is none. I am an old, old man, but to me, even to-day, the horror of it is haunting.

“The words ‘atheist’ and ‘woman’ seem to be the very antithesis of each other. That a woman might fall, might sin, was, I knew, possible; but that, so long as she drew the breath of life, so long as she retained her woman’s nature, she could deny or defy God, seemed to me unimaginable. Such a creature is a monster, a contradiction of the name of woman, the very apostate of her sex.

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“The immorality of her renunciation of motherhood (an immorality which is, I believe, a greater offence against God, against humanity, against nature, and against the nation, than that she should be a mother and no wife), threatens, it is true, the very existence of our race; but remembering what women are to-day, I could go on my knees to thank God that at least such women bear no children.”

Again the old man's voice broke and he uplifted eyes and hands in prayer :—

“God of Hosts, Lord of Childhood, look down on this people, that corruptly disobey Thy primal precept and command. Thou seest that we are drunken of pleasure, eaten up of luxury, rotten of ease, as were the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and of Ancient Rome.

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“ Let there not fall upon us that most terrible of all Thy vengeance which thou didst visit upon Ephraim of old, when Thou didst say, ‘ Ephraim is joined to idols : *let him alone !* ’ Let us not alone, great God, we pray Thee. Cleanse us of our corruption, purge us of our sin, even though Thou slayest, for it is better that God scorch with fire, or smite with thunderbolts, than that the sinful be left to his sin, and be let alone of God. For the sake of Thy Son, the Lord Christ, hear us and save us. Amen.”

In my dream, it seemed to me that God made answer saying :—

“ The prayers of the righteous avail ; and because even now there are many among this nation who follow after My commandments, I will visit upon this people that which shall turn them from their sin. It has of old time been decreed

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that, of this world, an end should, in God's good time, be made ; but whereas man has believed that the world's end should come suddenly and in a moment by fire, or slowly, by the dying out of life on the face of the earth by cold,—I, WHO AM, decree that in another way that end shall be.

“ Behold now I make barren the womb of the world.

“ Springtime shall come again, but with it shall come no new flower, no new bud on bush or on tree.

“ Springtime shall come again, but with it shall come no new bird, no new beast, no new creature of any kind.

“ Springtime shall come again, but with it shall come no new child.

“ Henceforth creation and procreation shall cease. God has said it, and what God has said shall be.”

PART II

D

I

IN my dream I looked upon the world, and, as a peach hangs by the wall, so the world seemed to me to hang against the wall of the heavens, like over-ripe fruit, ready to drop off and fall away from the world-tree which stands in God's great garden of the skies. The clock of the world was running down, and God's hand would wind it never again. The generation upon which I looked was to be the world's last, for the life of the world had become a fire that has no power to kindle new flame, and so must burn itself out into eternal dark.

The world was dying, but as yet the world knew it not, for many there were who discoursed learnedly of sun-spots and star

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changes, of diverted warm streams from the south, and floating iceberg islands and continents from the north, which, by chilling the world's atmosphere, had confused the seasons and so affected life on the globe.

But at last there came a time when, watching the more thoughtful and more observant, I saw upon their faces some puckering as of undefined perplexity. Just as at the approach of a thunderstorm there falls upon nature, even before thunder clouds appear, a sudden hush, a rumour as of coming disaster, which drives the cattle of the field, the creatures of the air to shelter—so over city and country there lay a sense of impending calamity. Men and women seemed dimly to realise that a change was taking place, of the exact nature of which they were not as yet aware. They

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would stop in their walking or in their talking to peer queerly about them, like those to whom familiar surroundings seem suddenly to have grown unfamiliar, but who fear to speak what is in their thoughts lest they be ridiculed of their fellows. Yet each day the faces, upon which uneasiness was written, multiplied ; and I saw that both men and women began to look furtively, fearfully, strangely, at each other. And with reason, for now I saw that women were fast losing their woman's loveliness ; men, their manhood's splendour and strength.

In all the world there is no lovelight so divine as the light which shines in the eyes of a father, of a mother, at first sight of their child. In all the world there is no sight more sweet, more sacred, more solemn, than

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the sight of the little child lying sheltered on the bosom of the mother, who, in her turn, seeks loving shelter and shepherding from the strong man against whose protecting breast she leans.

It is in Fatherhood, in Motherhood, that men and women become likest God ; since in a sense they are permitted to share with Him the joy and the mystery, the majesty and awe and wonder of creation. For this were they born into the world, born as it were in the purple. When man and woman, youth and maiden, love each other purely and truly, then, be their place high or be it humble, they become princes and princesses by right of succession and by right of royal birth, then to them comes naturally the voice and the manner of courts ; and when they marry, be their home cottage or be it

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castle, they shall enter it as prince and princess into a palace.

But they shall come to higher estate than this. There be they who maintain that love and life are consummated by the coming together in marriage of those who love; but so to speak is to misread the sacred mysteries. Is the means to an end of more moment than the end itself? Is it the scattering of the grain in spring-time, or the reaping of the ripe corn at harvest, which crowns the husbandman's year? When a man becomes a father, a woman a mother, then is he a king and a creator indeed, then is she a queen, and crowned with the rarest diadem that womanhood may wear. It is that men and women may be drawn together in love and marriage, thereby to carry on the work of creation which God Himself has begun;

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that earth may not be lacking in the laughter of little children, nor heaven in the lovely light upon the face of angels, who of their purity may see God—it is for this that God makes women divinely fair, makes men straight and strong and fearless.

But now from the faces and forms of the women upon whom I looked, something of the fairness and sweetness of womanhood were gone ; from the faces and figures of the men, much of their manly beauty and strength. They were like flowers upon whom the frost has fallen and that wither blossomless and seedless upon their stalks. They were kings and queens of love no longer, but base-born subjects and thralls of lust. And of their lust came not love, nor affection, nor even liking, but hatred and scorn. And of their hatred and scorn came fear—

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fear of each other, fear of foe, and fear of friend.

For now at last they knew that they walked a world whose days were numbered. What had been but a rumour in the air, a whisper in the ear, soon came to be murmured under the breath in the market-place, then to be openly discussed in the streets, and at last to be shouted from the housetops.

For springtime had come again, but with it had come no new flower, no new bud on bush or tree. Springtime had come again, but with it had come no new bird, no new beast, nor creature of any kind. Springtime had come again, but with it had come no new child.

Wherefore men and women looked into each other's faces and were afraid, for they knew now that the end of the world was nigh.

II

THEN madness seized them. They were like ship-wrecked sailors who, hopeless of rescue, and knowing that ere long they must be sucked under by the waters, seek to evade the horror of the last awful moment by stupefying themselves with drink. But that the winter of the world had come—that last winter to which shall succeed no spring, was now plain to all; and men cursed the fate by which their time on earth had fallen at such a season. “Why should we, of all earth’s generations, be thus singled out,” they said, “to come into the world, only to witness and to share in the world’s doom?”

“To our fathers and our fathers’

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fathers," one cried, "life was a V-shaped vista of happiness. A starting point there was, and this starting point men called birth: but the arms of the V opened out, broadening on either side, in a sweep so wide as to embrace the whole visible world, and stretching unendingly on into Eternity. Now the V of life's vista is inverted. We men and women walk its ever-narrowing sides; and as we walk, the point where the sides run together in eternal dark—the point where there is no outlet, and no turning back, is even now in sight. Where lurks he—god or devil—who has thus lured us into life's cul-de-sac? Let him come forth that we may have speech of him, sight of him, and curse him for a monster ere we die."

Then, when the outbreak of blasphemy had spent itself, there

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came a season of re-action. As a condemned prisoner sits hunched or huddled in his cell, body and limbs ice-cold and motionless, as if carved in stone ; the brain and the burning eyes of him all that is alive ; as he sits, unseeing for all his stare, unthinking for all his intentness, every mental faculty fixed and focussed upon his approaching fate, so men and women sat or stood or walked apart. In the sullenness of despair the world was settling itself down to die.

III

WHEN again in my dream I looked upon the world, I knew that the end was not far. Some twenty years or more must have passed since the world's doom was first pronounced. Those who had then been children were now women and men. Of those who had then been women and men, some were middle-aged, others were old and grey, and many were dead. The faces of all were strangely changed, but whereas the men seemed stern and worn and haggard, the faces of the women seemed to me to have regained all, and more than all, of woman's loveliness. Sad-faced they were, even as she who was honoured above all women ; but

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so beautiful, so divine, were they in their sorrow, that it was not difficult to understand how it is that men and women can see in the Virgin-Mother — that supremest type of pure and perfect and sorrowing womanhood — something of such sacred beauty that they are tempted to forget her humanity, and to yield to her such homage as should be accorded only to her Divine Son.

Most sad it was to see the younger women gather around one who was stricken in years.

“Dear mother,” one of them said, “we were children ourselves when God called the green grass and the flowers and the young creatures of every sort, and the little children, back to Himself, and so we remember not the world as the world was then. Will you not tell us of it, again ?”

“Ah ! the world as it was

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then!" sighed the old woman.
"I wonder whether any of us realized how beautiful it was? In those days the wind, which now blows scentless and joyless on our cheeks, would come on June mornings to call in at my window:—

"‘Lie-a-bed! Lie-a-bed!’ he would say, ‘While you slept, I have been a hay-making this many an hour, tossing the mown sweetness aloft, tumbling it, toying with it, diving into warm, un-gathered waves of it, as a swimmer dives into the sea; and then, like the swimmer, coming laughingly to the surface to shake myself free of the sweet foam and spray of the fields, as the swimmer shakes himself free of the salt foam and spray of the sea.’ But now the wind comes to us no more to whisper of the sweetness of hayfields, for the solace of green grass nowhere makes glad the eye. Dear God! I

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had not thought so to have missed the grass. I am not sure that I do not miss it even more than I miss the flowers. Missing the flowers, much as I love them, I miss but the exquisite broidery on Nature's mantle. But by the loss of the grass, Nature seems to have been ravished of the robe which covered her nakedness, and she cowers, shamed, unbefriended, and shivering before me ! ”

“ Tell us again of the flowers, dear mother,” pleaded a listener.

“ Ah ! the flowers ! ” cried the old woman brokenly, “ the flowers ! The very heart within me grows faint with the sickness of my longing. The earliest snowdrops—those nuns among the flowers, crystal-chaste and celibate from birth—which it may be, we first see standing (‘ little Sisters of the Poor ’) beside some humble door or in some cottage garden,

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wearing the white robe of their order, and with downcast eyes and drooped head, that they may not so much as look on evil.

“ Sometimes I think of them as dear children who have crept too early from bed, and so stand with little bare feet and inclined head, listening for the step of old Nurse Nature, and ready, should she chide, to scamper back and hide beneath the coverlet of snow.

“ When first I saw the snowdrops, I was as sure there is a God in Whom purity and love and loveliness abide, as if that God had Himself stooped down from heaven to give those flowers to me. And never did this soul of mine utter itself forth in intenser, purer prayer than when I first saw the miracle of the snowdrops’ green and silver bells among the snow.

“ Yet scarcely had I assured

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myself that this or that flower—the snowdrop or the wood-anemone—was indeed come, before it was gone again, and I remember, that to me it was as if I had let the angel-soul of some dear one from heaven come hither and return with cold, ungrateful welcome.

“The secret of the flowers, God never lets us make our own.”

“And now,” said another voice softly, “speak to us of childhood and little children.”

“Childhood,” answered the old woman, “was, in those happy days, the magic fountain at which we, who were old, drank to renew our youth. Looking upon those sweet child-faces, we grew young again, even as now, looking only upon the faces of the aged, we grow old before our time. Life was then an unending chain of flowers, which God’s own hand was, day by day, drawing upward from

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earth to heaven, and to Himself. Each of us was a single flower, a single link, upon the chain ; and though many of those we loved passed upward and out of sight, we knew that they had come to a fairer garden, whither the Father of flowers and little children would one day call us, and whither, in God's good time, those we loved and left behind would follow in their turn. But now it is as if the flower chain lay bruised and broken. God's hand draws us heavenward no more, and we are become worthless, as weeds that die and wither unwept. It is as if we had neither child on earth nor Father in heaven.

“ Around our dying bed neither son nor daughter of ours shall gather in love's last tender ministry. Our darkening eyes no dear familiar touch shall close ; our failing hands our children's hands

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may never hold in life' last moments, nor cross upon our breast when life has fled."

"A world without a child!" broke in another woman. "A world without a child! And women in it! One had thought that, finding herself in such a world, every woman had slain herself, or had not dared to be seen save betwixt the twilight and the dawn.

"Into London's river many an erring woman has leapt, rather than become a mother ere yet she was a wife. From London's bridges many a poor creature, weary of a life of shame, has cast herself, and wherein is our estate more honourable than hers? A world without a child! Yet a world in which men and women, for lust's sake, make counterfeit love; for lust and lucre's sake make believe to marry—for how can

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they be man and wife, whom God
has for all time put asunder !

“ Sister woman, upon the very
earth we tread, the shadow of our
shame has fallen. This earth has
become human as we are, a
woman as we are, sterile even
as we, our Mother no longer,
since, because of our sin, she is
pregnant with new life no more.
Happy are ye who are young, for
knowing not the world as it was,
you know not what you have lost.
A world without a child ! The
silence of it ! Dear God, that
silence hammers at my ears more
loudly than the clanging of a
thousand anvils. If, ere I die, it be
mine no more to hear the fledgling
birds telling their tiny beads of song
among the branches ; the milky call
of calves to cows, standing udder-
deep in the meadow, and the lazy
bass of the deep reply ; the high
treble of lambs upon the hillside,

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now dying down upon the wind
to a trembling sigh, now assailing
the ear in a very storm of gusty
and quavering plaint; if it be
mine to hear all these no more,
yet give me, ere I die, O God! at
least to hear the patter of little
feet upon the stairs; the soft
pounding of wee fists upon my
door; the babble of a baby-
mother's chats and confidences
and chidings among her dolls;
the chiming of child-laughter—
rippling and intermittent as of
wind-swayed silver bells among
the flowers—from garden and
meadow and lane; the soft intak-
ing of a baby's breath, what
time the flushed cheek lies warm
against my bosom; the placid
sigh when the little one stirs in
its sleep; the wee, fretful wail,
which changes to low crooning
and ceases contentedly as the
baby lips end their search, and

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settle down to that sweet indrawing, at thought of which even now this milkless bosom tingles and thrills—God of mercy, Christ of consolation, hadst Thou been woman, as we are, Thou hadst taken pity on us and pardoned us ere this.

“Lord, in our ears there sounds the wailing of little souls unborn—little souls shut out and prisoned from the sunlight in some far place, more drear and cruel than any imagined purgatory, in which the souls of men and women who have lived and died must suffer for their sins.

“And as those who have taken life, think that they see ghost-forms beckoning to them from afar, so are we haunted by souls unborn, yet not unslain. We, who should have been their mothers, have become as it were their murderesses, since, because

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of our sins they are denied the gift of life. And ever these little ghosts haunt us. Little frightened faces look out at us from the dark ; little eyes grown weary of watching for the mother who never comes, follow us wistfully in the daylight. Little forms, oh, so cold ! creep close to us at night, crying out vainly for the warmth and food and comfort which we may not give.

“Dear God, Father of the Saviour, take back this curse from us. Add, if it be Thy will, anguish to anguish, labour to labour. Increase, if so it seem good to Thee, the travail and the pain a thousand fold : but have pity on us and pardon us, and of Thy mercy give us a child !”

She ceased, and my dream dimmed, but ere it passed I heard the sound of many women sobbing in the night.

IV

WHEN next in my dream I looked upon the world, it seemed to me that yet another ten years had passed, that thirty years had gone by since any new child, new bird, new beast, new creature of any sort had come to bring new life into the veins of an ageing world. These ten years had worked a terrible change. When travellers who have visited the ruins of some dead city of the past, wish to convey a sense of utter desolation, they tell us that, in the streets and public places, grass was growing.

There grew no grass in the deserted streets of London, when in my dream I looked upon the great city, for every manner of

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green thing was dead. What had once been parks was now a desert of dust or caked clay. Every sign of shrub and flower was gone. What had once been avenues of trees were now rows of jagged stumps which, when the branches had rotted and fallen none had been at the trouble to remove. Unsightly, grisly objects, they still stood on either side of the roadway, like decayed stumps in the jaws of an unclean hag. Offal and refuse had gathered in the corners of the city, blown scraps of straw and paper littered the streets. Nine-tenths at least of the buildings were tenantless, and bills declaring that "this commodious residence" or that "double-fronted shop" was "to be sold or to be let," grinned mockingly through windows, some broken, and all grimed with dirt, as if in enjoyment of the

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jest of offering houses in which to dwell, shops wherein to vend merchandise, to a world which was so soon to end.

In keeping with the silence and tomb-like aspect of the city was the singular whiteness which the houses and public buildings had now assumed. As for some years all manufactures had ceased, and shops and factories were consequently closed, the pall of smoke which formerly lay over London was gone, and for the first time I saw the great city glittering in the smokeless morning. The houses and buildings which had once worn the city's soot-coloured livery, had, in the absence of smoke, been rain-washed from black to grey, and from grey to white, and now stood bleaching in the sun like tombstones in a cemetery. Dust and decay were upon everything. So deserted was

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the place that when, here and there, a solitary man, or perhaps a man and a woman, walked in what had once been a noisy thoroughfare—the uncanny clattering and echoing of their footsteps could be heard long after they had passed.

Had it been a waking instead of of a dream-world on which I was looking, I should probably have asked myself whether it were possible that from such a cause so great a change could come—whether, in thirty years, a world which had ceased to bring forth children would already be approaching extinction, or would let its cities thus come to ruin.

I have said, too, that in my dream I saw the “world” a-dying, for so at the time it seemed to me. Yet when, as must now be recorded, I learned in my dream that, in some parts of the world, life was

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but at its morning, that nations multiplied in numbers and waxed greater in strength, I saw no cause for wonder. In a dream, though all be inconsistent and contradictory, we ask no question.

And though I have said that in my dream, London seemed to me a deserted city of the dead, yet when in my dream I entered the cathedral of St. Paul, and saw a great congregation gathered together. I was not conscious of any sense of wonder or surprise.

Under the dome a space had been cleared, in the middle of which a solitary man was kneeling in prayer, surrounded on every side by a vast congregation of men.

“Weighty are the words of the dying,” he said, “wherefore, Lord God, we ask Thee to give ear. Already we are a dying race, our very existence menaced among

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the nations. For thirty years no child has been born to us, whereas the yellow races so multiply and increase that even now they overrun the world. Out of Africa, India, Australia have they driven us, and now of all our empire, of which we once boasted that upon it the sun never set, this our England only is left, and even now they are at our doors.

“They who were once our slaves threaten to become our masters. They whom we despised as heathen and uncivilised, now hold Christendom and civilisation in thrall. They have boasted, and called their gods to witness, that of the women of England they will make daughters of shame ; of the men of England, bondsmen and slaves to work a taskmaster’s will. God of Christendom, wilt Thou suffer this thing to come to pass ? Take back the curse which

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Thou hast laid upon us. Give us but one sign that Thou hast heard and pardoned, and we will go forth in Thy strength to do battle with our enemies and to overcome; but hear us, and haste Thee, for even now the heathen are at our gates!"

V

ONCE more I passed out into the sunshine, and as inside the cathedral a great congregation of men was gathered, so outside, gathered an even greater congregation of women, to whom a woman was then speaking.

“Dear sisters,” she said, “let us not forget that us women God hath supremely honoured, since, of a woman, He who is the world’s Saviour was born. At God’s altars, men may minister, but ere those altars were builded, God had made of our knees a thrice holier altar, at which God’s children first bowed themselves in prayer. By man’s voice God may speak to the nation, but, to the lips of

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God, the ear of every mother is laid. Wherefore is ours the greater sin, in that we have refused to listen. Wherefore is ours the greater shame, in that some of us have forgotten the seal of chastity which God set upon us when He chose a woman for the white casket which should bear to earth the Heavenly Pearl of God's incarnate Son. Let us therefore be constant in prayer before Him to whom all women are dear and sacred, since Him, in anguish and travail, a woman bore. Him, ere yet He was born, a woman saluted as the Saviour which was to come. Him, thereafter, good women hailed Lord and Master, faithful even when the chosen of His disciples forsook Him and fled—first at the sepulchre, as last beside Him at the Cross.

“Dear sisters, small wonder is it that we women bend the

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knee in worship and love to Him who is not only our Saviour and our God, but our Elder Brother, our Defender and our Friend.

“And when had woman such a friend as He? To Him the very harlot might come, knowing that, because of her womanhood, He held her honoured and holy. To Him the precious ointment wherewith the Magdalen anointed Him for His burial was less precious than her tears. When to Him they brought the woman taken in sin, for her had He no words of condemnation, save ‘Go, and sin no more!’ whereas at those who cried out that she be stoned, He thundered that terrible indictment ‘He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone.’ At those words they saw themselves branded before God and man, for the unclean things they were; and shrank away, one

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by one, from that avenging presence, and from the challenging purity of those eyes.

“ Small wonder, I say, that all which is holy in humanity should compel us to kneel to such a Master ; small wonder that all that is hateful and hypocritical should cry out ‘ Away with Him ! Crucify Him ! To the cross.’ ”

“ Sisters, He hears us still, though we be sinful even as she whom He bade to go and sin no more. Sisters, let us kneel to Him in prayer that He intercede for us to our Father and His.”

For a moment the woman ceased, as, still standing, she raised piteous hands to heaven, and then while some knelt, some stood, some flung themselves face downward to the ground, her voice broke out again in prayer :—

“ Lord God of the Living and of the Dead, hear and save.

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Thou wast the God of our fathers,
and of our fathers' fathers, of
our mothers, and of our mothers'
mothers, even as Thou wast
ours, ere we in our waywardness
and wilfulness turned aside. Lord,
we are like foolish children who
would be women and men, and
so wander from home, thinking
of their own puny strength to
battle with, and to conquer the
world.

“But when, bleeding and faint,
and by the world cruelly mis-
treated, they would crawl home
again—were it only to die—too
often they have wandered so far
that they can find no way back.
And we, Lord, have wandered so
far from home and heaven and
Thee, that we stand alone in the
world, orphaned even of God.

“Thou knowest that we women
have no strength in ourselves.
Alike in girlhood, womanhood,

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wifehood, motherhood—if only by our very woman's nature—we, more even than men, have constant need of Thee.

“Since to our human comprehension it is not possible to picture what Thou art, Thou permittest us to think of Thee as our Father, perhaps because when we think of motherhood we think most of love, when we think of fatherhood we think of love allied to strength. Yet know we well that even as Thou art incomprehensibly Three in One, and One in Three, so art Thou mystically and incomprehensibly Two in One, and One in Two.

“Thou art our Mother, no less than our Father; and sometimes to us women it seems as if there were more of motherhood in God than of aught else, as if only a woman could understand the heart of God.

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“We women carry our child long time under our heart, even as Thou hast carried us next to Thine.

“We women fashion our children of our body, feed them with our own life, suckle them at our breasts, even as Thou fashionest and feedest and sucklest us. For their sake we yield ourselves, and gladly, to suffer, even as Thou, O God of suffering, didst sorrow and suffer upon the Cross for us.

“For them it may even be that we are called upon to lay down our lives; even as Thou, Lord of Love, didst lay down Thy life for us.

“Because Thou didst lay down Thy life for us, we ask Thee to forgive.

“Because Thou didst lay down Thy life for us, we beseech Thee to show us Thy mercy.

“Because Thou didst lay down

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Thy life for us, we beseech Thee
to give us a child.

“God our Father, God our
Mother, God our Saviour, we
beseech Thee to give us a child.”

And from that great assembly
went up a cry of sterile anguish,
infinitely more terrible than the
cry of a woman in labour :—

“God our Father, God our
Mother, God our Saviour, we
beseech Thee to give us a child.”

VI

THE woman ceased as if strength had gone out of her. The uplifted arms dropped like dead weights and hung heavy and inert at her sides. The head, which had been thrown back, so that her face looked heavenward, slowly fell forward over her breast. She stood there rocking backward and forward monotonously, weeping meanwhile, the very picture of despair.

And again the cry welled up to heaven: "God our Father, God our Mother, God our Saviour, we beseech Thee to give us a child."

And then, it seemed to me as if, unseen of all, there stood among them One whose hands and feet

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and side were wounded ; as if unheard of all, He spoke words that were like the death-cry of a God :—

“ O sisters ! O daughters ! O children ! think you that I, whom your every cry crucifies afresh, have heard unheeded ? Think you there is any sorrow of yours that I share not, and may not share ?

“ Dear mothers who have looked on the little dead face of the child that was so young, and yet had seemed to have been part of yourself, from all time ; the child whom perhaps you laid cold in his coffin, clad in the white garments you had worked to keep warm his tiny body in the cot—dear mothers, know you not that never woman mourned a little one gone, but *My* heart broke at sight of her sorrow ?

“ And you, dear daughters, dear

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childless women, who desire and entreat the pangs of travail, crying out 'Let this body of mine endure a thousand fold the anguish, if only ere I die I may clasp to my bosom, body of me, blood of me, soul of me, a very child—mine, mine, mine, in this world, the next world, mine, for ever and all time.'

"So have you spoken, many of you; but think you that any of you have yearned for a child of the body, as I, in the body, have yearned to call one single child my own, yet may not, since every child in the world is mine?"

"Behold now, I who share your sorrow, as no woman, be she mother, sister, daughter or friend, has shared woman's sorrow before—I kneel with you to intercede for you to the God who is My Father and yours."

Again, as of old time in the

Without a Child

garden, He knelt in prayer ; and as He prayed so terrible was his agony that once again beads of a bloody sweat stood out upon His brow.

Upon such awful sight—God wrestling with God in prayer—it was not for human eyes to look, and turning away, I fell with bowed head and closed eyes to the ground. How long I remained thus I know not, but suddenly there came to me the sense of something unaccustomed in the world. What meant this new sweetness in the air, this strange stirring as it were at the heart of old earth, this loosening as of bonds, this feeling as of gentle thaw after iron months of frost ?

Lifting my head, with open eyes I gazed around. The Sacred Figure of the Saviour was gone, but looking at the spot where He

A World

had knelt, and where His tears
had fallen, I saw—sweeter, surer
pledge of God's forgiveness than
the covenant bow—the tender
verdure of new grass, the wonder
of white flowers abloom.

And as the breaking crest of a
wave whitens in the wind, so
suddenly, in the sunshine, I saw
a living green break foam-like
over the brown and barren fields,
and tip with emerald fire the
dead branches of bush and tree.

And by this sign men and
women knew that into a dying
world new life had entered, unto
a dying race the promise of a
child had come.

And to heaven went up a great
cry :—

“Christ has pleaded,
God has pardoned.”

And with that cry ringing
anthem-wise in my ears, I awoke

Without a Child

from my dream of a world without
a child, to hear the sweet clamour
of a little voice calling " Father !
dear father ! " at my door. 』

THE END.

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